

The Palace by rosekings

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Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair

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Summary:

"What's going on here?" Mayor Kline says as he approaches them.

"We're protesting the destruction of the Palace Arcade," Mike declares.

"You're – well, yes, I can see that. But the papers have already been signed, son. There's nothing I can do."

"Looks like we're at a stalemate, then," Max says smugly. "Because we want this arcade to stay just as much as you want it to go."

The Palace

Author's Note:

written as pt. 26 of [Stories From Summer](#)

June, 1985

“What the hell is this?” Dustin half shouts at Keith, the arcade employee who always seems to have a bag of chips with him.

“They’re tearing it down,” Keith says, his blue arcade shirt replaced with a Night Ranger one.

Max stares in disbelief at the *SET FOR REMOVAL* sign plastered over the chained door of the Palace Arcade. She’s known the arcade for all of eight months, yet the place was a safe haven for her, somewhere for her to go and zone out when life got to be too much. And if she’s feeling this devastated about it, she can only imagine how the rest of the party feels.

“Yeah, but why?” Lucas asks.

“Mayor Kline decided this ground would be better as a library.”

“But Hawkins already *has* a library!” Dustin protests.

“Yeah, and what about *us?!’*” Mike adds. “We’re practically bankrolling this place!”

“Sorry, loser. The demolition is in a couple days - nothing I can do.” With that, Keith walks off, leaving the six of them staring dismayed at their second home.

“Shithead!” Dustin bellows after him.

“Unbelievable,” Max says, scuffing at the grass with her boot.

“Unbelievable,” Eleven agrees. Max glances sideways at her, wondering if she actually knows what the word means. Max is sure she does (she isn’t stupid) but lately she had taken to imitating some

of the things Max said or did in an effort to adjust and be a normal teenager. It doesn't bother Max as much as she thought it would.

"We can't just let it close," Will says.

"Thanks, Captain Obvious," Max draws.

"What do we do, then?" Lucas asks.

They stand in silence until an idea slowly starts to form in Max's mind.

"In California, in Bellflower a couple years ago – they were going to close the pool," she starts. A smile crosses her face as the memory of California and her home resurfaces. "They were going to get rid of it to make room for a car wash. But nobody wanted it to close, so a group of high schoolers literally chained themselves to the fence and stayed there for three days straight."

"Did they win?" Dustin asks.

"Um – no. But they only had a few people. There's six of us, and all the middle schoolers will want to help, right?"

Will shrugs. "Maybe. Isn't this sort of illegal though?"

Mike snorts. "Who cares about illegal, Hopper's sleeping with Will's mom so he has to let us do what we want."

There's a loud laugh from Dustin and Lucas and a mild complaint from Will, but otherwise they don't disagree. Max looks at El, who has stayed silent, eyes glued to the clouds in the sky.

"El? You in?" she asks.

El's head snaps down and she nods fervently like she's been paying attention all along. "Yes! Yes, I want to help."

Max looks around at them, grinning, glad to have a purpose. "Looks like we've got a plan, guys."

Preparing everything for their thirty-six-hour stakeout takes several days and more arguments than Max anticipated. Convincing Hopper and Joyce to let El and Will stay out (and chain themselves to the doors of an arcade, no less) is a feat that Max feels rather proud of having accomplished. Sure, it takes some coercion and maybe a white lie or two about how Steve, a *responsible adult*, is definitely, *totally* going to be there the whole time, but they get through eventually.

“Okay, now we have to get the chains,” Mike says as the party huddles around the table in his swelteringly hot basement on the second day of their planning. “And someone needs to tell Steve to either stay with us or stay away from Joyce and the Chief.”

“We might want some food, too,” Max says. “Maybe some sleeping bags?”

“I can’t believe we’re actually going through with this,” Will groans. El shrugs, clearly just happy to be allowed out of the cabin for a whole night.

“*And* we need the rest of the kids from the middle school,” Lucas adds, ignoring Will’s complaint.

“Alright, Dustin and Will, you guys go round up as many kids as you can find – from the pool, the library, their houses, whatever. Me and El will get the chains and the locks and the snacks and all that. Lucas, Max, you go talk to Steve.” Mike steps back after he finishes doling out instructions and Max has to admire how well he leads their group. “Everyone clear?”

They all voice their assent and slowly filter out the back door, splitting up. Max jumps on her skateboard and easily keeps pace with Lucas on his bike as they head down the street towards Steve’s house.

“This was a good idea, Max,” Lucas says offhandedly. Max smiles, brushing the sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand. *This June could give California a run for its money*, she thinks.

“Thanks. I just – I really love that arcade, and I know you guys do too.”

“Yeah...I just don’t know how much *Steve* loves it.”

“You want to *what?*” Steve shouts after they hastily explain their plan. Max rolls her eyes impatiently.

“What we’re doing doesn’t really matter. We just need you to avoid Hopper and Joyce on Wednesday and Thursday, okay?”

“You’re seriously going to *chain* yourselves to a *building* while they *demolish* it?”

“They’re not going to demolish it because we’re going to stop them,” Lucas says.

“You guys are insane.”

Max shrugs. “The mayor’s obviously not going to help, so someone’s gotta do it.” Steve stares at them for a long time before finally letting out the heaviest sigh in existence.

“Yeah, whatever. I’ll stay out of Joyce’s and Hopper’s way. But that doesn’t mean I condone this, dumbasses.”

The six of them spend the next day rallying kids. Will draws up a flier and after Jonathan helps them print a hundred copies of it, they divvy the pages up between them and run around town in pairs, handing them out and explaining their cause. By evening they’ve got a good majority of the middle school and even some high schools promising to come. Max collapses into her bed that night completely worn out. She falls asleep instantly, a bit of copier ink still smudged across her cheek.

Max is the last to show up at the Palace on Wednesday afternoon. Everyone else is already there, fifty or so kids scattered across the front porch, slowly getting chained to the support poles and handrails by her friends. She quickly locates Lucas and dashes up to him as he slides two links of chain through a padlock.

“Hey, sorry I’m late.”

“Hey, Zoomer. Don’t worry, we’re almost done. Our protest officially starts in fifteen minutes.” Lucas nods towards the front doors, where Eleven is sat underneath the fat red *SET FOR REMOVAL* sign. Max gives Lucas a quick kiss on the cheek and heads over to El.

“El! You ready?”

El nods solemnly, her nose a fantastic shade of sunburn red. “Ready.”

Max takes a length of chain from one of the many piles stacked around them and locks her skateboard to a handrail. Then she sits down next to El, and after a few minutes, the rest of the party joins her.

“You sure you guys want to do this?” Will asks nervously, taking a seat next to Mike. On Mike’s other side is El, then Max, then Lucas and Dustin.

“Absolutely,” Dustin says. “We’re going to take that bastard mayor down.”

“But *chains*?”

“It makes a statement,” Mike says.

“Where did you get all these chains anyways, Mike?” Max asks, eyeing the nearest length suspiciously.

“Nancy. She had loads leftover from ’83.”

Two minutes to noon, Mike gets to his feet and locks all of them up to the handles and beams around the front doors, handing each kid the key to their padlock. Max tries to make herself comfortable, but she’s already accepted that, between the heavy chains wrapped around her torso and legs and the concrete beneath her, it’s not going to be a pleasant thirty-six hours. Thankfully Mike leaves everyone’s arms free, and each kid has a bag of snacks with them. Most of the kids said they’d be going home for the night, but that doesn’t matter much to Max – it’s in the morning when the numbers will matter most.

Mike sits down and, with the help of El and Will, chains himself in.

He glances at his watch with a smile. "It's noon. We're starting."

Dustin grins. "This is gonna be worth every minute."

"I'm having second thoughts," Dustin moans. Max sighs, almost ready to voice her agreement. She's never been so sweaty and bored in her life. So far, it's been about as eventful as watching the news with her mom.

"Guys, come on, it's only been three hours," Will says.

"Only three?" Lucas asks in disbelief. They all let out a groan.

They munch on their snacks and pass around the one comic book that Will brought as the time slips by, each minute seemingly longer than the last. They unchain themselves every hour to stretch and use the bathroom in the (wonderfully air-conditioned) gas station across the street. They don't encounter any police officers, thanks to Hopper, but several mothers throw dirty looks their way - not that it bothers Max (there's very little that bothers Max). She'd flip them off if she could get away with it.

"I spy...something orange," Mike says, bringing Max's attention back to their game of I Spy. Desperate times, desperate measures.

"Is it my hair?" she says.

"Damn. Your turn."

Max casts her eyes about the scene around them, finally landing on a green car pulling into the parking lot. "I spy something green."

"Dustin's booger? God, Dustin, get that out of here," Lucas groans, pressing into Max's side in an attempt to evade the product of Dustin's nose. Dustin winces and digs a tissue out of his backpack.

"Is it that kid's shirt, Max?" Will asks, pointing to his right. Max shakes her head. Eleven raises a hand and points directly the the car. Max lifts an eyebrow.

“Yeah, actually, it is the car. Your turn, El.”

“No, look.”

Max follows El’s line of sight. Jonathan Byers and Nancy Wheeler have just stepped out of the car and are currently walking towards them, a dozen grocery bags in their hands. She leans across El to swat Mike and Will. “Hey, sibling alert.”

Nancy and Jonathan carefully step between the piles of kids to reach Max and the others. Nancy surveys them with a small smile. “Going strong, I guess?”

“Something like that,” Mike answers distractedly, poking at the plastic sacks. “What’s in the bags?”

Nancy drops them next to him and El helps pass several down the line. “Fuel. I figured Mom didn’t give you anything good.”

Jonathan nudges Will’s shin with his foot. “Mom really letting you stay out all night, huh?”

“Yeah, can you believe it? But why are you in her car?”

“Steve’s working on mine.”

From the far end, Dustin lets out a cheer. Max looks over to see that he’s discovered a massive bucket of Red Vines in one of the bags. “Nancy, you’re my hero,” he says, biting off the top halves of four Vines at once.

Nancy looks at him bemusedly. “Yeah, well, just try not to get killed by a wrecking ball tomorrow, okay?”

“Hey,” Mike says, grabbing Jonathan’s attention. “If you see your mom or Hopper, tell them Steve’s with us.”

Jonathan’s eyebrows furrow. “But he isn’t.”

“Well, they think he is, so just –“

Nancy rolls her eyes and grabs Jonathan’s hand. “We got it. We’ll

cover for you. Good luck, guys.”

As they head back to their car and pull away, Max leans forward, gesturing for the Vines bucket. “Dude, share the love.”

The sun finally decides to set, which is both a relief and a misery as it cools the air and brings out the mosquitoes. Some high school girl pulls out a can of bug spray but by the time it makes its rounds to Max, it's empty. She leans against the door and tilts her head to the deep purple sky. It doesn't look anything like California sunsets. Here the colors are paler, less intense, more blended together, but it's still beautiful in its own way, she decides.

She had expected all their buzz to die down with the sun, but if anything it's the exact opposite. Everyone is ramped up on Twinkies and soda, excited that they're spending a night outside home. It's something about the exhilarating feeling of defiance and Max can't deny she's enjoying herself. El finds several packages of glowsticks inside one of Nancy's grocery bags and goes absolutely ballistic when Will cracks one and it lights up bright pink. There's all different kinds – sticks, necklaces, bracelets – in all different colors and enough for every kid there to have plenty. They start a *take two and pass it down* chain and by the time Max's watch reads 11pm, the sky is black and the arcade's exterior is lit up with kids laughing and talking in glowing neon colors.

“I wish we could get up and dance,” El says wistfully.

“To what music?” Will asks.

They're all silent for a moment, and then a grin lights up Dustin's face. “I know a song.”

Max whips around to look at him. “Dustin, I swear to god, if this is another one of your dumbass camp songs –“

“Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall, ninety-nine bottles of beer! You take one down, pass it around, ninety-eight bottles of beer on the wall!”

The song comes out of Dustin's mouth at max volume and

immediately hooks the rest of the kids in. Max's protests are only half-hearted – not a minute later the entire lot is singing along at the top of their lungs, swaying in their spots on the concrete, waving their glowsticks in the air, and Lucas is elbowing her, grinning at her, and she finally breaks and bellows along with them.

"Ninety-six bottles of beer on the wall, ninety-six bottles of beer! You take one down, pass it around, ninety-five bottles of beer on the wall! Ninety-five bottles of beer on the wall, ninety-five bottles of beer..."

Max croaks out at thirty-two bottles. Most of the kids die out between forty and twenty; in the end it's a yelling contest between Mike and a junior boy that Max can't even see. They both make it to the end and receive an outstanding applause from everyone.

"It's midnight, is anyone going home?" Will asks once they've calmed down and recovered their breath. Max's high from the combined sugar, glowsticks, and singing has finally worn off – she's exhausted.

"None of us are, right?" Dustin asks, referring to the party.

"No, but I know some of the other kids wanted to go or weren't allowed to stay."

Mike lets out the bathroom-break whistle and there's a loud jangling as everyone pulls out their keys to unlock themselves. Max gets to her feet and stretches her arms above her head as high as they'll go.

"Mike, maybe we could forget the chains for the night?" El suggests, examining the deep red grooves left on her legs by the links.

"If I gotta pee, I don't wanna wake everyone up to do it," Lucas agrees. Mike shrugs.

"Yeah, sure. We can put them back on in the morning." He turns to address the rest of the group. "Hey, it's midnight – whoever wants to go home can now, just make sure you're here at nine tomorrow!"

"Bathroom?" Will says, dropping the last of his chains on the ground.

"God, yes," comes the party's reply.

When they return from the gas station, the arcade is empty. Completely, entirely empty, the only sign of their protest being the piles of chains, candy wrappers, and glowsticks scattered around the place. Max gapes at the scene.

“Are you serious?” she asks of no one in particular.

“I can’t believe every single one of them left,” Lucas says.

With a shared sigh they move forward through the desolate remains, picking up all the trash and collecting the still-lit glowsticks in a bag. Dustin and El drag all of the chains into a massive pile in a corner and Mike dumps all the locks and keys into his backpack. When Max asks how he plans on matching each key and lock later on, he just shrugs tiredly. She gets it – they’re all feeling a mild sense of defeat.

“It’s just tonight,” El says reassuringly. “They’ll come back tomorrow.” They’re all too tired to argue.

Max collapses back into her spot, shoving her pillow under her head and crawling into the sleeping bag she brought. She hasn’t used it in ages; it still has the smell of Yosemite, from back when she and her dad would go camping every other weekend. The memory is bittersweet and she pushes it aside.

Her friends settle around her in their own sleeping bags. It isn’t comfortable by any means but she has Lucas right next to her and telekinetic El on her other side, and she forces herself to think of it as a group sleepover with concrete instead of carpet. The dull warmth of the night slowly washes over them, strengthening the sound of the loud cicadas that never seem to cease and the occasional noise from down the street that makes Max startle from her sleepy haze.

After a few minutes, she reaches out to find Lucas’ hand. He’s right there, his soft breath brushing her cheek. “Hey, Zoomer,” he whispers.

“Stalker,” she says with a sleepy smile, even though she knows he can’t see it.

“You tired?”

“That’s an understatement.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

They lay there in silence, all of Max’s slowly fading consciousness focused on Lucas’ warm hand in hers. *Sleep...sleep...sleep...sleep...*

“Is she *snoring*?”

Dustin’s outburst breaks sleep’s hold on everyone and there’s a collective groan. “Screw you, Henderson,” Max mumbles, just to top it off.

“Yes, Dustin, she’s snoring, alright?” Mike says defensively. “She does that. It’s cute. Leave her alone.”

A moment later there’s a loud snore from El and a barely-suppressed laugh from everyone.

“Can we get back to sleep now?” Mike says impatiently. Dustin huffs from Lucas’ other side.

“Yeah, yeah, sorry, whatever.”

Max jolts awake, extremely disoriented. *What the hell?* She brings her watch to her eyes, wincing at the harsh light: 3:15am. *Why am I awake?*

She quietly sits up. The night slowly comes into view as her eyes adjust to the light provided by the streetlamps. Nothing looks out of place – all her friends are in line beside her, the streets are empty. Everything is quiet, save for El’s and Dustin’s (ironic) snores.

She’s about to shrug it off and go back to sleep when a rustling reaches her ears. She whips around to face the forest behind the arcade, straining to see anything in the darkness. There it is again – the crunch of leaves somewhere in the forest. Normal, sure, if there was wind. *Which there isn’t*, she thinks, dread gnawing a hole in her stomach. The noise in the forest gets louder, closer, accompanied now with the snapping of twigs. She still can’t see a damn thing.

A jagged, painful scene arises in her mind's eye – the metallic scent of blood, the screeching of monsters outside, the intense, sharp fear that shuts down all motor functions. *Not now, Mayfield. Get it together. This isn't '84.* With a tight swallow she pushes away the memory and shakes El. “Hey, El. El, get up.”

El is up and alert in a split second. “Yes?”

“I think there's something out there,” Max whispers.

They both stare at the tree line, waiting with their hearts pounding in their chests. El makes a move to stand up, but at that moment, something darts out of the trees. Something small, fast, and most definitely cat-shaped.

Max slumps back against the doors with a heavy sigh. “Just a cat.”

“Are you sure?” El says, eyes following the cat's path down the street.

“Yeah. Sorry.”

El shrugs like it's no big deal, settling back down in her cocoon of blankets. Max stares at the spot across the street where the cat disappeared, waiting for her heart to return to its normal rate. After a minute she pulls her sleeping bag up around her then grabs her pillow and shoves it behind her head; laying down isn't an option for her rattled nerves anymore.

“Are you okay?” El whispers. Max looks down at her – all she can see are her eyes.

“Yeah. Fine.”

“I know what you were thinking.”

Max winces. “Kinda hard not to think anything else these days.”

“You can talk to me,” El says softly, sincerely.

“I know. I'm just – I'm working through it.”

“When it gets bad, Hopper tells me to take it one day at a time.”

Max nods and takes a deep breath, closing her eyes. "One day at a time."

El's hand finds its way into Max's and she squeezes it reassuringly. "Goodnight, Max."

"Night, El."

And Max drifts off quicker than she thought she would.

"Oh my *god*, my neck, my neck, my goddamn *neck*, my head's going to be stuck this way for *life*." Max slowly and painfully turns her head side to side, cringing at how bad the crick is. Her complaints wake up Mike, who lets out an even longer string of curses at his own neck troubles. Max looks around for her pillow – there it is, wedged between her thigh and Lucas' head, having fallen in the middle of the night. With a sigh she leans forward to snatch it back, elbowing Lucas in the process. "Shit, sorry –"

Lucas responds with a grunt and doesn't move a muscle.

The sun has barely crested the horizon yet Max can already feel the heat of the day creeping up on them. The town is still sleeping, the only open places being the bakery and the gas station. She shifts to lie down on top of her sleeping bag and dozes in and out for a while. Around eight-thirty she's finally dragged to her feet by both the party and her bladder.

Mike lets out a yawn as he pulls a sleepy El up. "Bathroom and breakfast," he says. They nod and make their way to the gas station, taking turns in the bathroom. After a stop in the bakery for two dozen donuts and some juices, they collapse back in their spots at the arcade, eating in silence as the sun begins its arc across the sky.

The kids start to trickle in at nine. By ten, everyone from yesterday is back, their sleeping gear has been shoved to the side, and Mike has all of them chained up again.

"We don't back down, alright guys?" he says to the group at large. "We're saving this arcade whether they like it or not."

There's a roar of approval from the kids and then Mike sits back down and locks himself up.

"Anyone know when the demolition is supposed to happen?" Dustin asks, licking his fingers clean of donut sugar.

"Ten-thirty, I think," Mike answers. Max looks at him skeptically – the truth is, none of them really know how this is going to go. At the very best, they win their protest without argument. At the most likely, they win with quite a bit of argument. At the worst, they get thrown in jail, and at the *very* worst, they get killed by the demolition equipment (which Max knows is highly improbable, but after the events of '84, she can't help herself).

"We'll win," El says, as if reading Max's mind. "I can feel it."

It doesn't do much to reassure any of them.

Soon enough, the construction company trucks pull into the empty parking lot and a dozen workers in orange helmets spill out. Their expressions of confusion clearly indicate they weren't expecting resistance (it's Hawkins – who is?). Max sits up a little straighter and glares right at them.

"You kids know you can't be here, right?" the pot-bellied Man In Charge says.

"Actually, we can," Max answers. "We have the right to protest."

"Girl, I've got a job to do."

"We don't care," Mike fires back. "Tell your boss we aren't going anywhere."

The Man In Charge lets out a heavy sigh and turns back to his crew. "Someone drive back to the building to tell the boss we've got a holdup."

Max grins – it's progress. The demolition crew piles back into their air-conditioned trucks to wait while one of their team is sent off to bring backup. The sun is relentless, bearing down on them like a hundred-pound weight of heat. Max pulls her hair into a ponytail and

drains another one of the water bottles that Nancy brought them.

“Where’s the wrecking ball?” Will asks.

“I don’t think they can bring it until they have visual confirmation of the site,” Lucas says.

“Maybe they won’t bring it at all if we can stop them,” El adds hopefully.

Fifteen minutes later the company truck pulls back in. Three people climb out – the worker, the head of the company, and Mayor Kline himself. Max almost laughs – old man Mayor in an ill-fitting black suit doesn’t look like much of a threat to her. All of the kids swivel to glower at him, radiating defiance.

“What’s going on here?” he says jovially as he approaches them.

“We’re protesting the destruction of the Palace Arcade,” Mike declares.

“You’re – well, yes, I can see that. But the papers have already been signed, son. There’s nothing I can do.”

“Looks like we’re at a stalemate, then,” Max says smugly. “Because we want this arcade to stay just as much as you want it to go.”

There’s a shout of agreement from the kids around them. Mayor Kline looks more annoyed than angry, but just as he opens his mouth to say something else, another car pulls into the lot, drawing everyone’s attention.

It’s the Chief’s station wagon. The entire party’s breath catches in their throat as Hopper gets out and leisurely heads towards them. *Is he here to stop us or help us?* Max wonders.

“Sheriff!” Mayor Kline says by way of greeting. “Do you know about this?”

Hopper side-eyes the mayor. “It’s Chief. And yeah, I did.” Hopper turns his gaze to El. “Steve’s here, huh?”

El turns bright red at being caught in their lie. “Sorry.”

Hopper just shakes his head amusedly and pulls off his sunglasses, turning to Kline. “You’re really gonna tear this place down for *another* library?”

Kline stares at him, clearly taken aback by whose side he’s on. “I mean – nobody even goes to this arcade anymore –“

“That’s bullshit!” Dustin yells. Lucas slaps him and Hopper gives him a *you better shut the hell up right now or I’m not helping you* glare.

Will tries a calmer approach than Dustin. “Mayor, everyone comes here all the time. It’s one of the best places in Hawkins, right guys?” There’s a loud chorus of agreement and Will gives a winning smile. “We love it here.”

“See, Larry? They love it here,” Hopper says, lowering his voice so that Max has to strain to hear. “Look. I know what you’re getting out of this deal, even if you’ve bullshitted the county board into thinking it’s out of the goodness of your heart. ”

Max’s jaw drops as Kline’s eyes widen and his hands start fidgeting with his tie. “I don’t – I mean – it’s not – I really don’t understand what you’re trying to say, Sher – Chief.”

Hopper smirks. “Yeah, I think you do. And I don’t think the board would be too eager to support your reelection campaign next month if they knew how big a cut you’d be taking from this.”

Mayor Kline gapes at him. “Are you *blackmailing* me?” Hopper raises his hands in a conciliatory gesture.

“All I’m saying is that it’s probably in your best interest to leave this place standing.”

Max is triple-taking. She looks at the rest of her friends, just to make sure she’s not imagining things – they’re shell-shocked too, frozen in place at this turn of events.

Kline is absolutely speechless. His eyes dart from Hopper to the construction crew to the arcade and back, sweat beading on his

forehead – though Max thinks that could just be from the heat. She doesn't even know if anyone's breathing anymore.

Finally, Kline heaves a sigh and turns to the truck. He pulls a few sheets of paper out through the window and returns to Hopper. "Looks like you win this one, kids." He resignedly tears the demolition contract in half and the entire lot erupts in shouts and cheers as the pieces flutter to the ground.

"We did it!" Dustin yells, reaching out to hug whoever he can. Max grins as she hugs Lucas with one arm and attempts to get out of her chains with the other. They finally get themselves untangled and rush through the crowd towards Hopper. Mayor Kline is nowhere to be found.

"Thank you so much, Hopper," Mike says breathlessly. "I don't think we could've won that without you."

"El told me how important this was to you guys," Hopper answers with a smile. "And I knew Kline had something shady going on."

"How could you be positive, though?" Lucas asks.

"Had some help." Hopper points to his station wagon and they all turn to see Nancy Wheeler, *junior clerk at the city hall*, standing by the door with a grin on her face. Max internally smacks herself – *of course* it was Nancy. She makes a mental note to thank her later.

Max pushes through the kids to yank the red *SET FOR REMOVAL* sign off the front doors. She holds it high above her head and with a loud cheer, throws it to the ground. "We saved the Palace!"

Thus begins the thundering chant of "We saved the Palace!" from every soul and Lucas appears from the crowd, grinning like the sun.

"Good job, Mayfield."

"I didn't do it for you," Max says. "I did it so I could keep on kicking your ass at Dig Dug."

Lucas scoffs and grabs her wrist to pull her close. "Just you wait. I'm getting better."

“Sure you are.”

She closes the distance between them and their kiss echoes all the triumph and celebration around them. Somewhere over the fireworks in her head, Mike declares they all deserve celebratory ice cream, and when Lucas pulls away and beams at her with more pride and love than she’s ever seen, she’s never felt more like a winner.